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International cooperation in the field of informatics

Report of the Secretary-General

Introduction

1. The present report summarizes actions taken by the United Nations Secretariat and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) following Economic and Social Council resolution 1998/29, in which the Council requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its substantive session of 1999 on initiatives taken by the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics. The resolution reiterates the high priority attached to easy, economical, uncomplicated and unhindered access for States Members of the United Nations and for observers, through, *inter alia*, their permanent missions, to the growing number of computerized databases and information systems and services of the United Nations. Furthermore, the resolution underscores the importance of modern information technology for the development activities of the United Nations and the need for global cooperation to ensure a timely and effective response to the year 2000 challenge.

I. Activities of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on the need to harmonize and improve United Nations information systems for optimal utilization and accessibility by all States

2. At its substantive session of 1998, the Council requested the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group to continue to fulfil, for one year, from within existing resources, the provisions of the Council resolutions on international cooperation in information technology, and to facilitate the successful implementation of the initiatives being taken by the Secretary-General with regard to the use of information technology. As reported in the previous reports of the Secretary-General (E/1996/81, E/1997/88 and E/1998/44), the principal vehicle for delivery of information services will continue to be the Internet. This approach is in line with the policy established earlier by the Information Systems Coordinating Committee (ISCC) of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC).

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3. The Working Group reiterated its support for the use of the Internet as the basis of future development and enhancement of information services provided to Member States. At its meetings, the Working Group focused on the year 2000 problem and issues that relate to providing Member States with better electronic access, including:

(a) The need to further improve electronic connectivity via the Internet for all Member States in their capitals and at major United Nations locations;

(b) The need to intensify efforts to provide electronic connectivity to those Member States that do not currently have this service;

(c) The need for Member States to have improved access to a wider range of United Nations information on economic and social issues, development, political issues and other substantive programme areas, and to have all official documents available via the Internet;

(d) The need for Member States to have improved electronic mail links with the United Nations, with its specialized agencies and with each other;

(e) The need for intensified specialized training for the staff of missions to enable them to take advantage of the facilities being developed for Member States, in particular electronic mail and Internet Web pages;

(f) The need to access United Nations data on-line using low-cost telecommunications links or providing other modalities (for example, CD-ROM) whereby Member States can have access to specialized databases not available on the Internet;

(g) The need to make arrangements, as appropriate, to provide permanent missions of developing countries with the hardware platform to utilize Internet technology;

(h) The need to intensify the use of videoconferencing to further communication and interaction between the United Nations, permanent missions and academic institutions;

(i) The need to address the year 2000 issue within the United Nations Secretariat and to ensure that remedial action is being taken, as appropriate, and that contingency plans are being developed;

(j) The need to build awareness of the year 2000 problem among Member States and provide a platform for Governments to address the issue at the global and regional levels;

(k) The need to broaden access to information at the country level.

II. Action taken by the Secretariat and the United Nations Development Programme in response to issues raised in the Working Group

A. Facilitating information access and dissemination to missions in New York

4. The United Nations has further intensified its efforts to provide Internet connectivity and access to all permanent and observer missions. The provision of these services is gradually being transferred from UNDP to the Secretariat and is being managed by the Information Technology Services Division, Office of Central Support Services. As of May 1999, about 75 per cent of all missions have been transferred to the service provided by the Secretariat. At the same time, new e-mail accounts are being assigned to missions in the newly created domain @un.int. For missions that were unable to connect to the Internet owing to lack of computer equipment, the United Nations Secretariat continued to provide personal computers, printers and modems. So far, missions have been provided with 32 computers and modems to enable Internet access.

5. The Information Technology Services Division has also installed 13 personal computers in the conference room hall. More are currently scheduled to be installed. This equipment allows members of delegations to access the Internet, check their e-mail and communicate with their missions while at the Headquarters building. To ensure uninterrupted availability of this service to delegates, the Division checks the computers installed in the Delegates' Lounge for proper functioning on a daily basis.

B. Facilitating information access and dissemination in country locations

6. At the country level, UNDP pursues a number of objectives in information and communications technology which build on the activities described in the previous report (E/1998/44):

(a) Providing access at the country level to substantive information, knowledge and best practices;

(b) Promoting connectivity and access;

(c) Developing Web sites for information for development;

(d) Promoting development and empowerment through information technology;

(e) Initiation networking in developing countries;

(f) Supporting technical cooperation at the regional level.

7. As part of its efforts to provide access to information at the country level, UNDP has developed "knowledge broker" Web sites. Designed as a "one-stop shop", the sites offer, through well-structured hyperlinks, access to a wealth of practical information, relevant content material, curricula and solutions on a broad range of aspects of sustainable human development through lead articles and a plethora of hyperlinks.

8. The key sites, managed by the UNDP Bureau for Development Policy, are the INFO21 Web site at *http://www.undp.org/info21* and the Sustainable Development Networking Programme Web site at *http://www.sdnp.undp.org*. These sites have been combined and linked with another international site located at http://www.knowledgebroker.org. Together, these Web sites constitute a global storehouse of development information and solutions for local communities, Governments, development practitioners, researchers, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, especially small and medium-sized businesses. They reduce the otherwise lengthy search time on the Internet for appropriate information, which invariably is expensive and in many cases unaffordable.

9. Special topical sub-sites of the INFO21 site offer detailed content and information on human rights, the Y2K problem, electronic commerce and Internet governance issues. Other sites are maintained by the Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries and the Subregional Resource Facility (SURF) and can be accessed on the central UNDP Web site (www.undp.org/toppages/discover/index.html).

10. In cooperation with the Government of Brazil, the UNDP Special Unit for Technical Cooperation among Developing Countries initiated the development of an Internet-based system, called the Web of Information for Development (WIDE). The goal of the WIDE initiative is to facilitate access to local expertise within developing countries and to foster South-South collaboration in the sharing of knowledge and skills among developing countries.

11. The initial phase of this project provides on-line and real-time access to information maintained in three key databases: (a) an experts database; (b) an institutions database; and (c) a repository of successful and innovative experiences. The vision behind this initiative is to create an electronic venue that serves as a communication vehicle, an efficient storage space, a distribution and access site and a collaborative workspace for stakeholders. The development of the system has been completed and the Web site (http://www.wide.org.br) will be launched shortly.

12. The UNDP Special Unit has also launched projects for the collection of "innovative and successful experiences", in collaboration with leading agencies such as the Third World Network of Scientific Organizations in the field of science and technology, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in the field of agriculture, food security and related areas, the Third World Network in a range of social, economic and environmental areas, and the Caribbean Centre for Development Administration in the priority areas of Small Island Developing States. The experiences compiled under this initiative are being captured in WIDE. Through the WIDE system, institutions will continue to be encouraged to share their innovative experiences. The cases will also be disseminated in print-ready format to stakeholders in technical cooperation among developing countries.

13. In 1997, the Bureau for Development Policy of UNDP created the Information Technology for Development Programme. This initiative addresses the development-related issues associated with the emerging global knowledge and information society. The main objectives are to raise awareness among the development partners of UNDP, to promote a better understanding of the potential of information and communications technologies in the development context and to promote the use of information technology as tools for empowering communities and other development stakeholders. The feasibility of different approaches are tested through pilot projects, such as the creation of community telecentres and the development of information technology-based educational and other programmes, especially for women and youth.

14. The scope of the Programme's activities comprises awareness raising, advocacy and policy advice; promotion of connectivity; capacity- and institution-building activities; content development, especially in local languages and in a culturally sensitive manner, and facilitating communications and networking.

15. The use of multimedia community telecentres, especially at the rural level, is being promoted as the central modality to pursue the above objectives. These centres will serve as central hubs for development applications, such as long-distance education, telemedicine, support to small, medium-sized and microcredit enterprises, measures to

enhance good governance, the promotion of e-commerce, environmental management and empowerment of various societal groups, especially women. Pilot projects have begun in Egypt and others will follow soon in South Africa and Burkina Faso.

16. Another project carried out by the Bureau for Development Policy is the Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP), which is a catalytic programme to kick-start networking in developing countries. It emphasizes connectivity, networking and capacity-building as well as knowledge and information sharing with the goal of improving the quality of life. SDNP is currently operational in over 40 developing nations.

17. Through a participatory and multisectoral approach, SDNP promotes national, regional and global networking. It also facilitates and provides Internet connectivity for Government and civil society organizations, supports national network development and promotes content provision and aggregation of national information sources. Moreover, SDNP offers capacity-building programmes through training and skill enhancement activities.

18. One of the activities of the regional bureaux of UNDP in the field of information technology is the Internet Initiative for Africa. The objective is to promote the establishment of Internet services to sub-Saharan Africa as a development modality and as a means to strengthen economic and social development. This project is a part of capacity development for sustainable human development, and falls within the mandate and scope of the United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s. It builds on available local expertise for the formulation and implementation of the project. Provision is also made for public and private sector training at the technical and management levels. The Internet nodes that are provided will be open to all interested groups, including public and private sector organizations, Governments, non-governmental organizations and academia.

19. Since its launch in July 1997, the Internet Initiative for Africa has conducted eight Internet assessment missions to the following countries, Burkina Faso, Chad, Gambia, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Namibia, Nigeria and Swaziland. All missions have resulted in a signed cost-sharing memorandum of understanding between the respective Governments and UNDP. Apart from addressing the funding aspect, these agreements detail the activities to develop Internet access and build technical capacity in the respective countries.

20. In Asia and the Pacific, UNDP has created the Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme (APDIP), based in Kuala Lumpur, which assists Governments, civil society and the private sector in the region through a variety of training programmes, policy and project advice and networking support. For the Arab States region and the Latin American and Caribbean region, specific regional programmes focusing on information technology policies and projects in support of sustainable human development are under preparation and are expected to be launched in 1999.

21. UNDP is also an active member of a number of international partnerships to advance the promotion of the use of information technology for development purposes. Foremost among these activities is the Global Knowledge Partnership, which emerged from the 1977 Toronto Conference on "Global Knowledge for Development in the Information Age". It brings together on an equal footing some 50 partner organizations, such as Governments, multi- and bilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and academic institutions. They are all committed to sharing information, experiences and resources and to launching joint projects on a pilot basis. The Partnership plans to convene another conference on global knowledge for development with the theme "Access, empowerment, governance" in March 2000 in Kuala Lumpur.

22. In 1998, the Secretariat made available 1,065 personal computers and 250 printers. UNDP contributed an additional 60 computers. This equipment was distributed to permanent missions of developing countries to support a variety of technical cooperation projects undertaken by Member States.

C. Electronic dissemination of United Nations information via the United Nations Internet Web server and other related Web facilities

23. The United Nations Web site (www.un.org) is coordinated, maintained and managed by the Department of Public Information with the technical support of the Information Technology Services Division. Established in August 1995, the Web site has grown into a major repository of information about the United Nations and contains links to the Web sites of the United Nations family of organizations. With the latest addition of an Arabic and Chinese language feature in November 1998, the United Nations Web site is now available in all six official languages. In 1997, there were a total of 42.7 million accesses to the Web site, growing to 98.5 million in 1998. By the end of May 1999, there were nearly 58 million accesses.

24. United Nations information centres/services/offices continue to develop local language Web sites to meet the needs of local audiences. Currently, there are 23 such sites worldwide; addresses may be obtained at www.un.org/aroundworld/unics/icpages.

25. On 4 March 1999, exactly one year after the streaming of United Nations daily radio news, the first truly audio-visual Web site was launched (www.un.org/av), offering radio feature programmes with photographs and other graphics as well as audio and video clips. Work is under way to provide more audio-visual content on the Internet, with the expectation that all United Nations radio programming will be available as streaming media by 2003. A pilot study is being undertaken on the feasibility of distributing high-fidelity radio programmes over the Internet. The distribution of high-resolution photographs is being addressed by the Department's implementation of an integrated digital photo system, which will be fully operational in 2003. News coverage by United Nations Television could be made available as live streaming media as soon as the United Nations local area network bandwidth permits and the ancillary technical provisions are made available.

26. *Development Business*, a bimonthly publication of the Department of Public Information, went on-line in early 1999. *United Nations Development Business Online* (www.devbusiness.com), available by subscription only, offers the advantage of a continuously updated and easy-to-use search resource that enables users to quickly identify sales and consulting leads by country, region, sector, bank or type of goods and services.

27. The new "civil society/business" feature of the United Nations Web site (www.un.org/partners), launched in January 1999, seeks to highlight the efforts of the United Nations and its partners in civil society and business in promoting the goals and ideals of the Organization, and provides contact points for more information on the thematic areas of the work programme of the United Nations. Other recent additions include the Economic and Social Council site (www.un.org/esa/coordination/ecosoc), pages on current topics, such as the crisis in Kosovo (www.un.org/ha/kosovo), and new audio-visual material.

28. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library's presence on the Internet (www.un.org/depts/dhl) continues to increase. New features include the electronic newsletter *Depository News Updates*, as well as the "UN system pathfinder", a database guide, launched in March 1999, to major reference sources and frequently requested reports issued by the United Nations and its specialized agencies. Existing services have also been expanded. *United Nations Documentation: Research Guide* (www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide), for example, now includes specialized chapters (international law, human rights, peacekeeping), more detailed explanations (for example, on vetoes in the Security Council) and links to the full texts of General Assembly resolutions. Furthermore, the Library's site has become more multilingual, with documents in Arabic, Chinese and Russian posted since November 1998.

29. A specialized Web site for maps and related resources (intranet/Cartographic/English/htmain.htm has been launched on the United Nations Intranet. Posting on the Internet for general access is expected shortly. The site contains up-to-date peacekeeping maps, regional and country-profile maps and information on cartographic resources and recent acquisitions of the Map Library.

30. The United Nations CyberSchoolBus (www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus), the educational Web site for young people, continues to be a popular element of the United Nations Web site and was one of 20 finalists, from over 1,400 entries, for the recent Ericsson Internet Community Award. The newsletter on that site has 6,000 subscribers, most of whom are teachers. In 1998, over 700,000 children participated in the interactive projects of the site.

31. The delivery of customized information via e-mail list services continues to grow rapidly throughout the United Nations system. In 1998, the total number of electronically delivered documents was 2.9 million (compared with 1.7 million in 1997). A special service makes 32 electronic publications available to over 5,000 subscribers worldwide. In some cases (the Department of Political Affairs, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the United Nations Office at Vienna, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and the World Health Organization), the information is also posted on local bulletin boards and fed directly into on-line databases.

32. As part of its outreach to civil society, particularly in developing countries, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library has been conducting regional training programmes for depository libraries to facilitate working with United Nations documents. Two intensive three-day workshops were held in New Delhi and Port of Spain in January 1999, emphasizing access to United Nations electronic information.

D. The optical disk system

33. Since the establishment of the optical disk system in 1993, the number of users at the permanent and observer missions to the United Nations at Headquarters and in government capitals has been growing constantly. As of May 1999, the number of registered user accounts of permanent missions and Member States, mostly in foreign ministries, which allow access to the systems in New York or Geneva, totals 978, more than quadruple what it was in May 1998. The system is also used on a regular basis by staff at most duty stations.

34. The number of documents available on-line has increased by more than 30 per cent over the past year. As of May 1999, more than 108,000 documents in several language versions, 436,000 in total, are stored on the system and can be retrieved around the clock. The range of documents currently available includes:

(a) All United Nations parliamentary documentation since 1993 in all official languages;

(b) Resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Trusteeship Council since 1946;

(c) A number of official records of the four main bodies since 1946;

(d) Administrative issuances of the Secretariat;

(e) Documents of the forty-fourth to forty-sixth sessions of the General Assembly.

35. The number of users accessing the optical disk system via the Internet is continuing to increase. Since June 1997, all permanent missions in New York have been able to connect to the system through the Internet. Similarly, users in Member States worldwide rely on the Internet for downloading documents from the system.

36. The constantly growing number of users and documents stored on the optical disk system is stressing the existing technical infrastructure to its limits. The Information Technology Services Division is in the process of assessing a number of alternatives for further improving on-line document access and upgrading the technology in line with the Secretary General's strategy for the creation of an "electronic United Nations", announced in his report on renewing the United Nations (see A/51/950, paras. 244–247). Providing access to information of high quality, at low unit cost, remains a priority of the work programme of the Division.

37. In response to section C of General Assembly resolution 52/214 of 22 December 1997, a cooperative project was initiated in mid-1998 between the optical disk system and the Dag Hammarskjöld Library for the retrospective posting of major organ documents on the optical disk system. By the end of March 1999, documents from three sessions (the forty-fourth, forty-fifth and forty-sixth) of the General Assembly had been added to the optical disk system in English.

E. Provision of electronic mail and Web-page hosting services to permanent and observer missions

38. A new server, dedicated exclusively for the use of permanent and observer missions was installed in 1998 by the Secretariat. This server provides electronic mail and Web-page hosting facilities to all permanent missions. In addition to this service, the Secretariat is implementing a remote e-mail access facility that allows users to access their electronic mail through the Internet. This is an ideal tool for individuals who travel and need to access their mail regularly.

F. Specialized Internet training given to the staff of missions

39. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library continues to offer its popular CyberSeek Internet course as well as training on the optical disk system for delegates and staff of permanent and observer missions. In addition, a new training option has been developed: a series of subject-oriented and news-gathering courses in Internet searching on such topics as international organizations, environment, sustainable development, human rights and human resources.

G. The year 2000 issue

40. The Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Informatics has taken the lead in raising awareness among Member States of the nature of the year 2000 problem and the action to be taken. The General Assembly, in its resolution 52/233, requested the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly at its fifty-third session on the steps taken within the United Nations system and with Member States to resolve this problem. The report on steps taken within the United Nations system to resolve the year 2000

date conversion problem of computers submitted by the Secretary-General (A/53/574) details the various initiatives taken by the Working Group to build awareness among Member States and permanent missions of the seriousness of the problem.

41. Furthermore, in resolution 52/233 the General Assembly calls on the Economic and Social Council to prepare guidelines on which Member States may be able to draw in addressing the diverse aspects of the year 2000 problem. To facilitate the work of the Council, the Working Group has drafted guidelines (E/1998/85, annex) summarizing best practices for assessing and solving year 2000 problems and for establishing contingency plans at the national and international levels.

42. The Working Group, alarmed by the discovery that there were major gaps in year 2000 compliance not only among developing countries, decided that it was imperative to convene a meeting of national year 2000 coordinators at United Nations Headquarters before the end of 1998. The joint efforts of the Working Group, the Information Technology Services Division and other United Nations offices, combined with the financial support of the World Bank, made it possible for representatives from more than 120 countries to attend a one-day meeting on 11 December 1998. Also attending the meeting were year 2000 experts from the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Telecommunication Union, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the International Civil Aviation Organization and the Joint Year 2000 Council of the Bank for International Settlements, as well as permanent representatives of missions to the United Nations.

43. The Secretary-General addressed the meeting, calling on the international community to spare no effort to meet the challenge of the year 2000 problem. The Under-Secretary-General for Management delivered the opening presentation on the subject of year 2000 contingency planning. The remainder of the meeting included expert sectoral reports on: banking and finance; telecommunications; nuclear power; oil and gas; shipping and ports; and aviation. An exchange of national experiences and viewpoints on contingency planning and crisis management, followed by a discussion of international strategy, concluded the meeting.

44. One key result of the meeting was the heightened awareness that a regional as well as national and global approach should be adopted to address the issues. This understanding has led to the formation of regional groups and resulted in the Asian group organizing regional meetings and the South American group doing the same under the aegis of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR). It was felt that a follow-up meeting would be desirable as soon as Member States had set up or refined their national plans and regional groups had reached a conclusion in their evaluation of cross-border problems. Regional groups are scheduled to meet again at United Nations Headquarters on 21 June 1999, and a meeting of the Working Group and the national year 2000 coordinators will follow on 22 June 1999.

45. A special page on the United Nations Web site (www.un.org/members/yr2000) containing information on the year 2000 issue had been established earlier and is regularly updated. Background material related to the above-mentioned meeting and a list of all national year 2000 coordinators has been posted on this site. Independently, UNDP continues to provide, on its Resources Knowledge Web site, a separate and extensive section on the year 2000 problem and its relevance for and impact on developing countries.

III. Concluding remarks

46. In an increasingly networked world, electronic communication and dissemination of information will play a pivotal role. The Working Group, in cooperation with the Information Technology Services Division, the Department of Public Information and UNDP, will continue to improve and expand electronic information services provided to Member States and permanent missions and assure that the technologies employed are abreast with technological development. At the country level, UNDP will intensify its efforts to promote the use of information technology in order to help people to share information, knowledge and expertise that are relevant to sustainable development.

47. Based on the work done during the past year, the Working Group, in cooperation with the Secretariat, other United Nations organizations and the World Bank, will reinforce its efforts to promote year 2000 awareness and contingency planning at the regional, national and international levels. The network of national year 2000 coordinators that has been established will be an important tool for furthering international cooperation in the field of informatics beyond the year 2000 issue.